GRAY'S ELEGY

WRITTEN IN A COUNTRY CHURCHYARD.

ARTISTS' EDITION.

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AN ELEGY

WRITTEN IN

A COUNTRY CHURCHYARD.

BY

THOMAS GRAY.

THE ARTISTS' EDITION

LONDON:
JOHN SLARK,
BUSBY PLACE, CAMDEN ROAD.
1885.

THE "ELEGY WRITTEN IN A COUNTRY CHURCHYARD," apart from its high poetical beauty and charm of sentiment, is unrivalled in the series of pictures it calls up of human life in connection with the sweetest aspects and most tranquillizing influences of Nature. There is, consequently, no poem that might have been expected to tempt more frequently the pencil of the artist or lend itself more readily to the purposes of illustration. Yet, strange to say, the advantages which it offers in this way have been almost wholly neglected. Scanty illustrations, most of them of a very inferior type, are to be found in some editions of Gray's Poetical Works, but so far as modern art is concerned the "Elegy" has hitherto remained virgin soil. It is, therefore, with the hope of supplying a great and long-felt deficiency that the publishers issue an edition in the preparation of which they have enlisted the co-operation of many of the best American designers and engravers of the present day.

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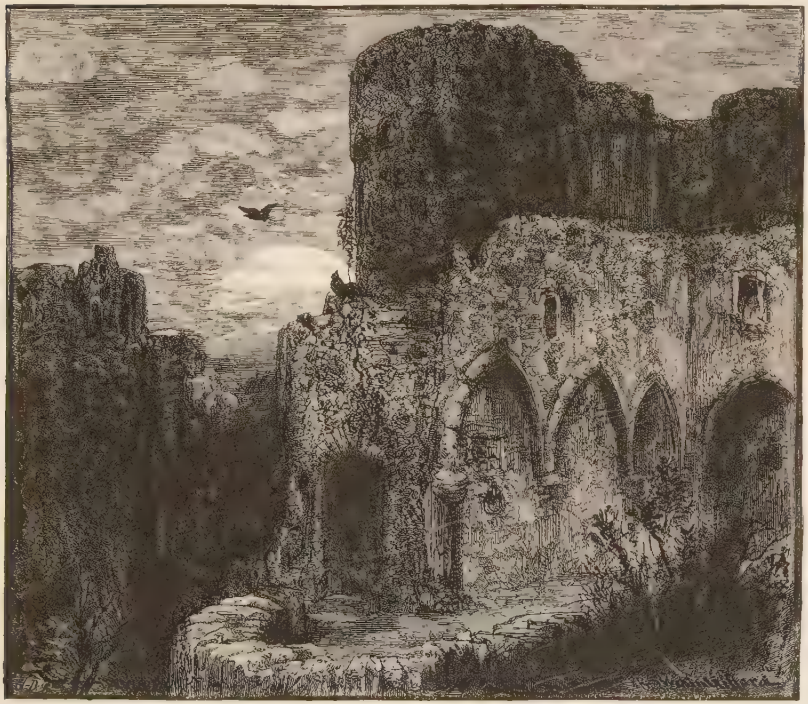
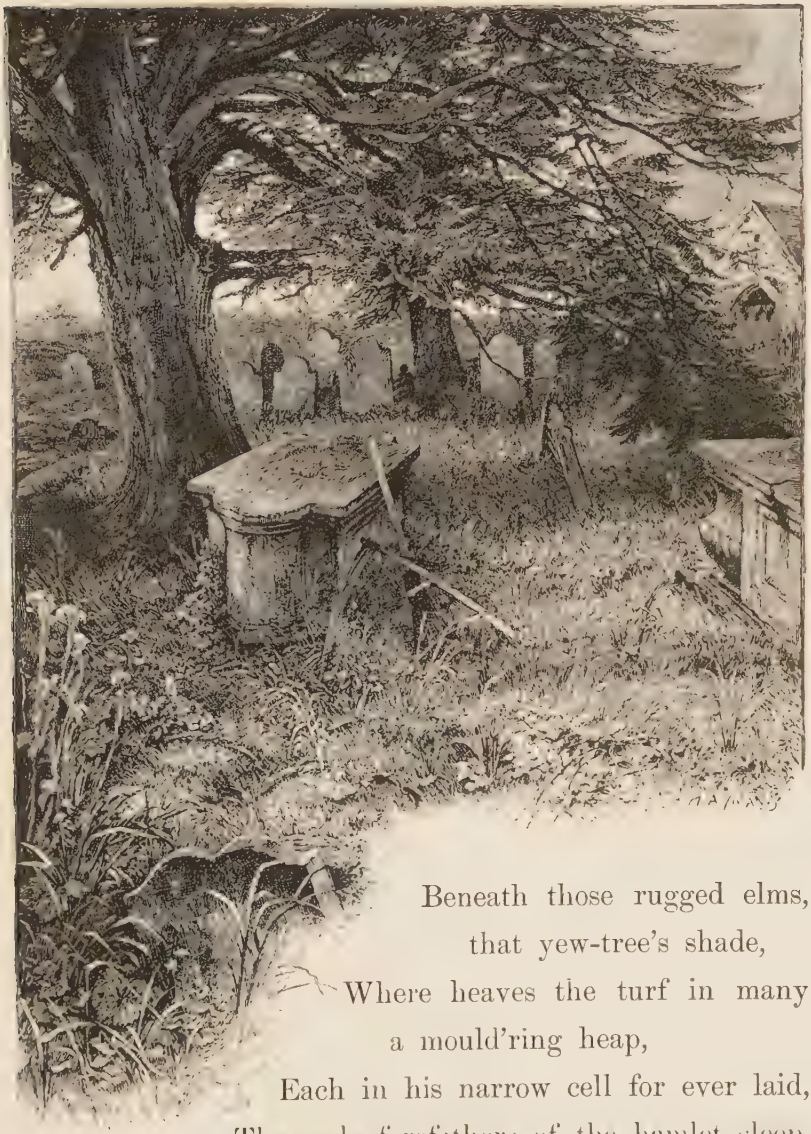
AN ELEGY.

The curfew tolls the knell of parting day,
The lowing herd winds slowly o'er the lea,
The ploughman homeward plods his weary way,
And leaves the world to darkness and to me.

Now fades the glimmering landscape on the sight,
And all the air a solemn stillness holds,
Save where the beetle wheels his droning flight,
And drowsy tinklings lull the distant folds;

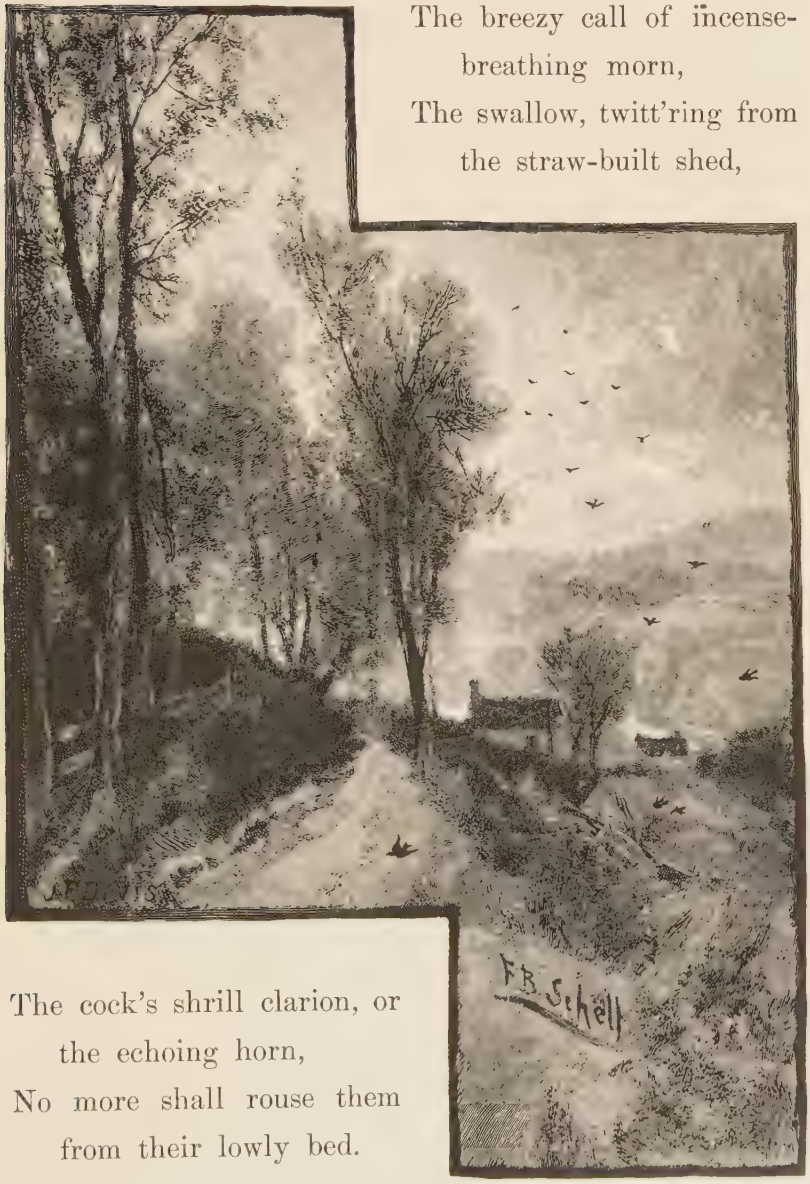


Save that, from yonder ivy-mantled tow'r,
The moping owl does to the moon complain
Of such as, wand'ring near her secret bow'r,
Molest her ancient, solitary reign.



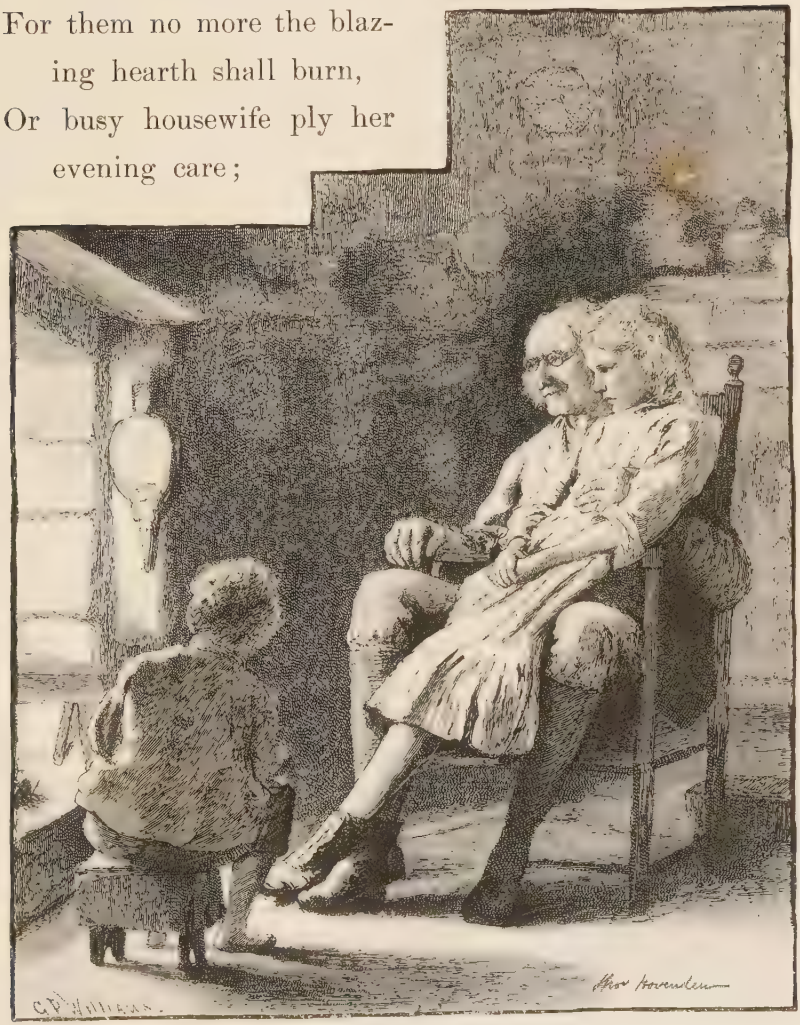
Beneath those rugged elms,
that yew-tree's shade,
Where heaves the turf in many
a mould'ring heap,
Each in his narrow cell for ever laid,
The rude forefathers of the hamlet sleep.

The breezy call of incense-breathing morn,
The swallow, twitt'ring from the straw-built shed,



The cock's shrill clarion, or the echoing horn,
No more shall rouse them from their lowly bed.

For them no more the blazing hearth shall burn,
Or busy housewife ply her evening care;



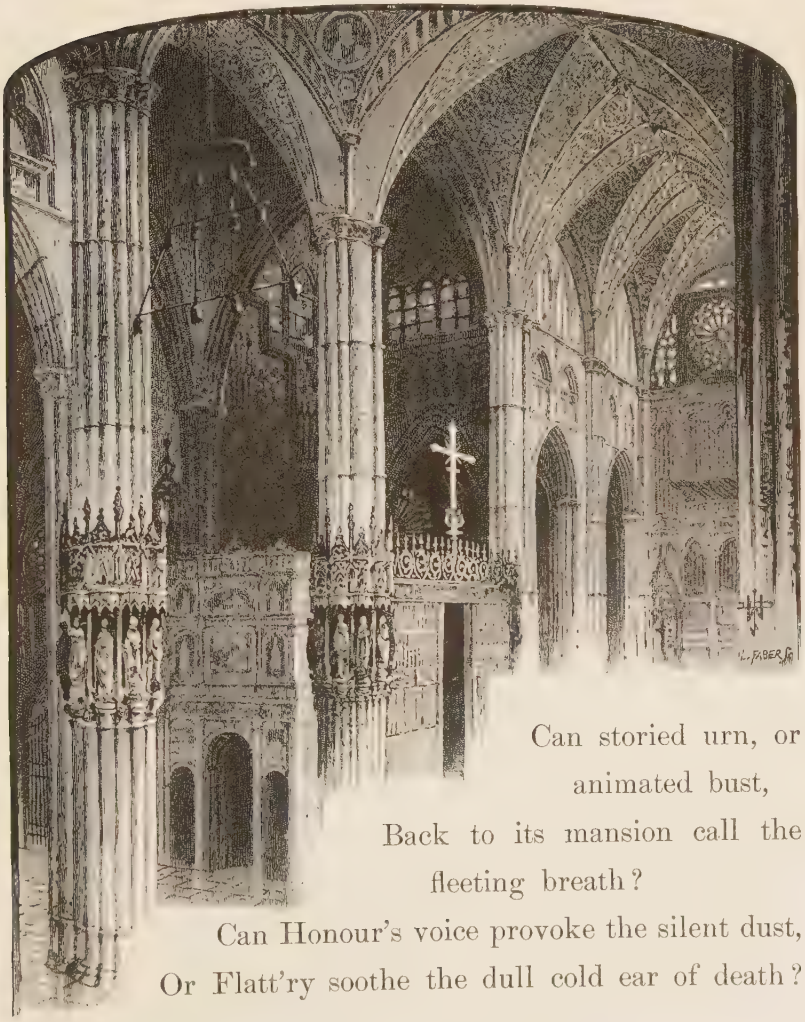
No children run to lisp their sire's return,
Or climb his knees the envied kiss to share.

Oft did the harvest to their sickle yield;
Their furrow oft the stubborn glebe has broke;
How jocund did they drive their team afield!
How bow'd the woods beneath their sturdy stroke!

Let not Ambition mock their useful toil,
Their homely joys, and destiny obscure;
Nor Grandeur hear with a disdainful smile
The short and simple annals of the poor.

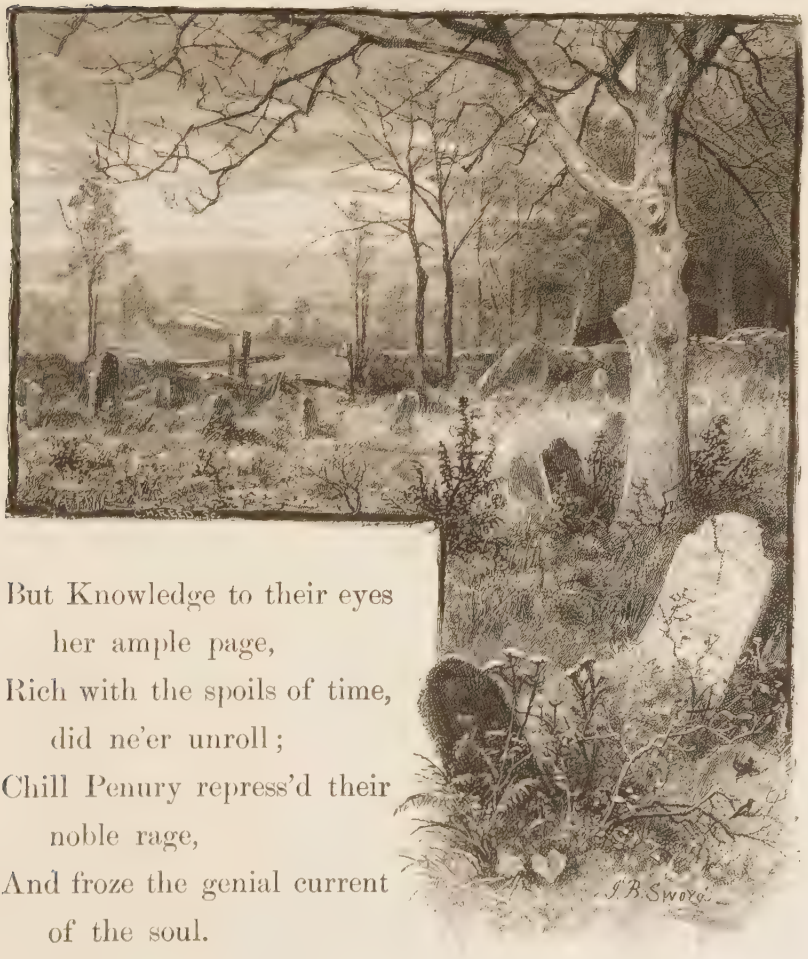
The boast of Heraldry, the pomp of Pow'r,
And all that Beauty, all that Wealth e'er gave,
Await, alike, th' inevitable hour;
The paths of Glory lead but to the grave.

Nor you, ye proud, impute to these the fault,
If Mem'ry o'er their tomb no trophies raise,
Where, thro' the long-drawn aisle and fretted vault,
The pealing anthem swells the note of praise.

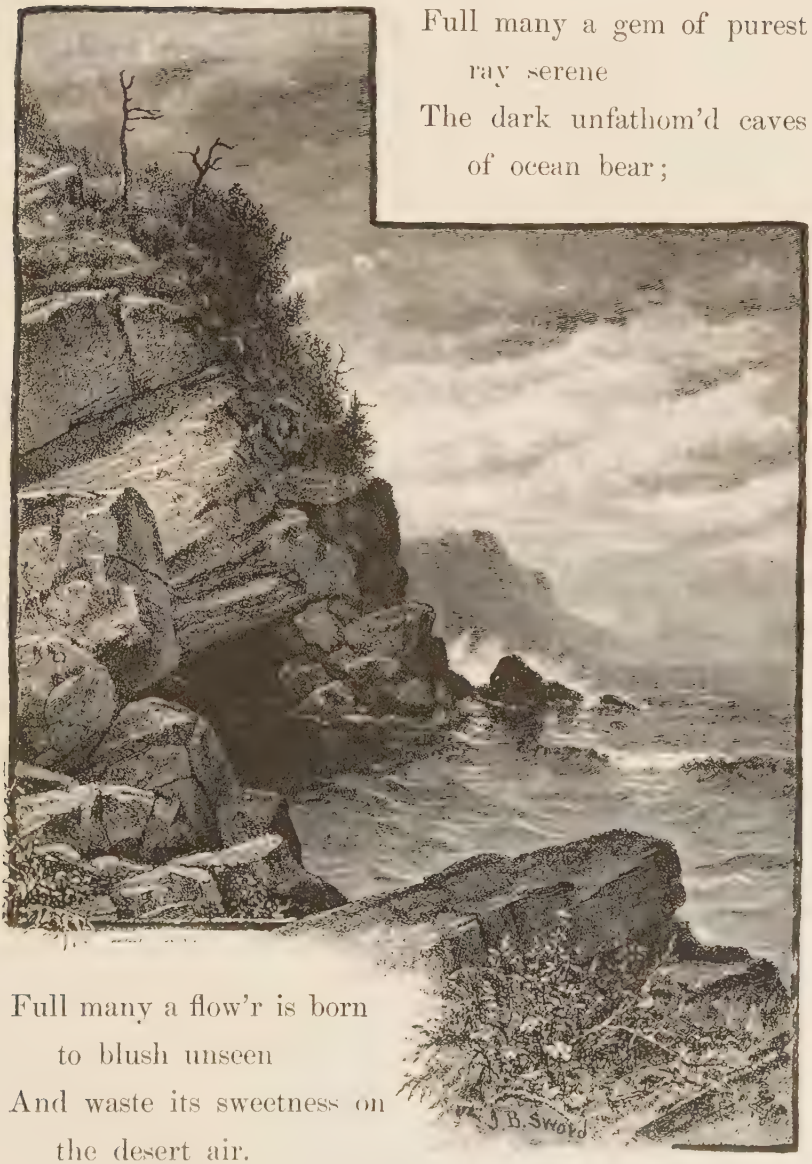


Can storied urn, or animated bust,
Back to its mansion call the fleeting breath?
Can Honour's voice provoke the silent dust,
Or Flatt'ry soothe the dull cold ear of death?

Perhaps in this neglected spot is laid
Some heart once pregnant with celestial fire;
Hands that the rod of empire might have sway'd,
Or waked to ecstasy the living lyre.



But Knowledge to their eyes her ample page,
Rich with the spoils of time, did ne'er unroll;
Chill Penury repress'd their noble rage,
And froze the genial current of the soul.



Full many a gem of purest
ray serene
The dark unfathom'd caves
of ocean bear;

Full many a flow'r is born
to blush unseen
And waste its sweetness on
the desert air.

Some village Hampden, that with dauntless breast
The little tyrant of his fields withstood;
Some mute inglorious Milton here may rest;
Some Cromwell guiltless of his country's blood

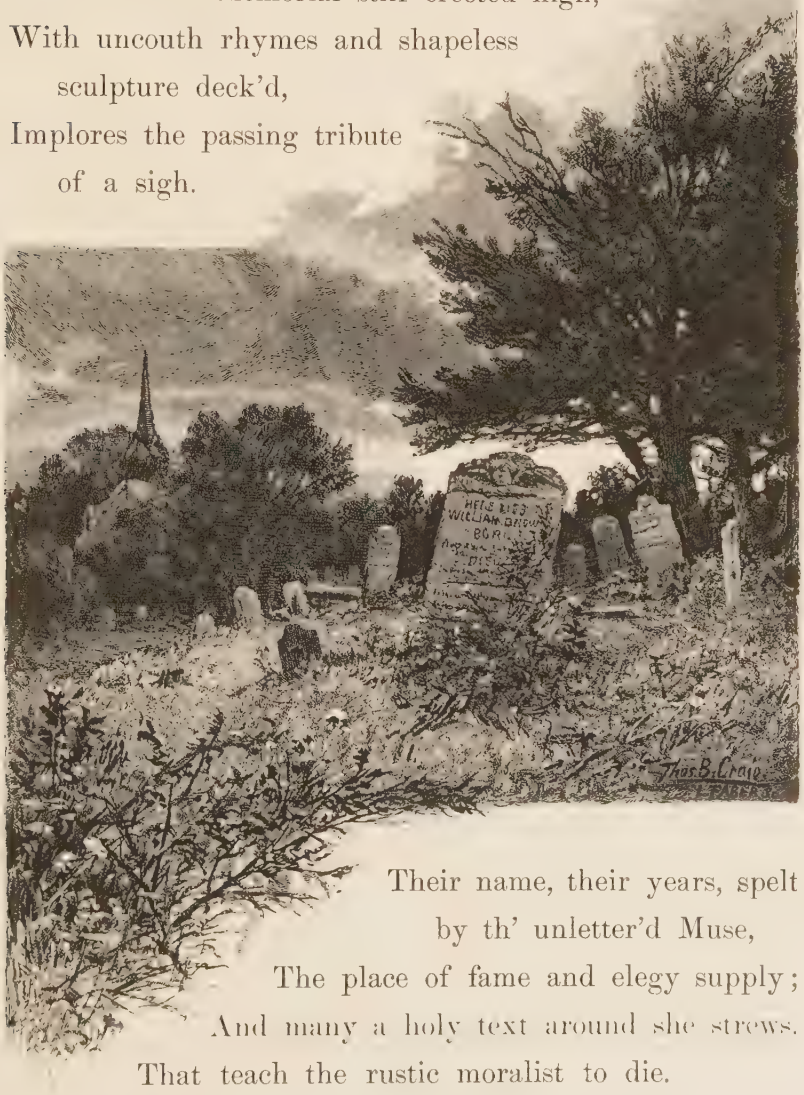
Th' applause of list'ning senates to command,
The threats of pain and ruin to despise,
To scatter plenty o'er a smiling land,
And read their hist'ry in a nation's eyes,

Their lot forbade; nor circumscribed alone
Their growing virtues, but their crimes confined:
Forbade to wade through slaughter to a throne,
And shut the gates of Mercy on mankind;

The struggling pangs of conscious Truth to hide,
To quench the blushes of ingenuous Shame,
Or heap the shrine of Luxury and Pride
With incense kindled at the Muse's flame.

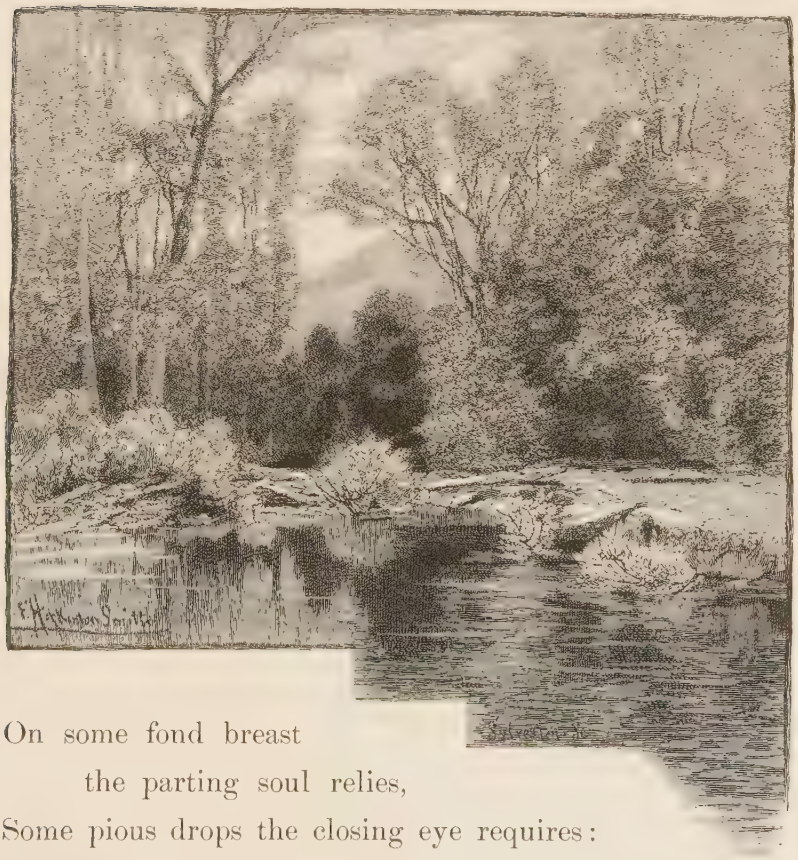
Far from the madding crowd's ignoble strife,
Their sober wishes never learn'd to stray;
Along the cool, sequester'd vale of life
They kept the noiseless tenor of their way.

Yet ev'n these bones from insult to protect,
Some frail memorial still erected nigh,
With uncouth rhymes and shapeless
sculpture deck'd,
Implores the passing tribute
of a sigh.



Their name, their years, spelt
by th' unletter'd Muse,
The place of fame and elegy supply;
And many a holy text around she strews,
That teach the rustic moralist to die.

For who, to dumb Forgetfulness a prey,
This pleasing, anxious being e'er resign'd,
Left the warm precincts of the cheerful day,
Nor cast one longing, ling'ring look behind?



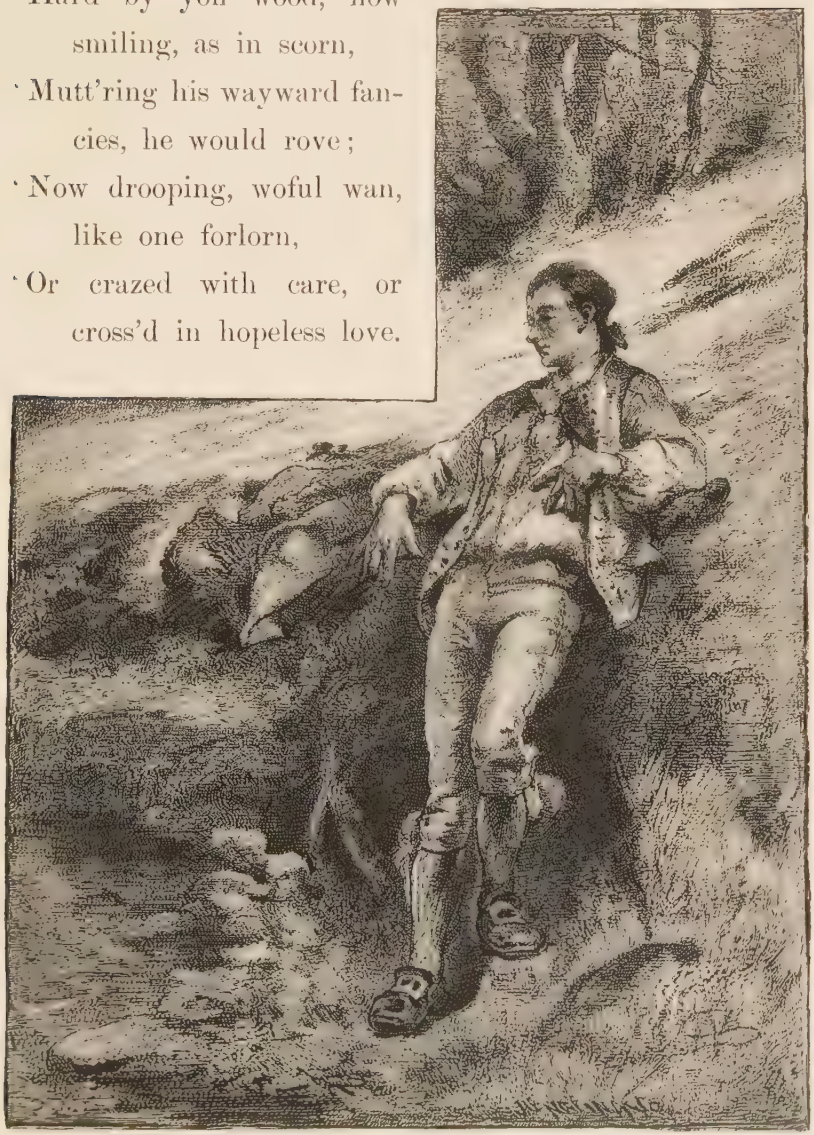
On some fond breast the parting soul relies,
Some pious drops the closing eye requires:
Ev'n from the tomb the voice of Nature cries,
Ev'n in our ashes live their wonted fires.

For thee, who, mindful of th' unhonour'd dead,
Dost in these lines their artless tale relate,
If, 'chance, by lonely Contemplation led,
Some kindred spirit shall inquire thy fate;

Haply some hoary-headed swain may say,
'Oft have we seen him, at the peep of dawn,
'Brushing, with hasty steps, the dews away,
'To meet the sun upon the upland lawn.

'There, at the foot of yonder nodding beech,
'That wreathes its old fantastic roots so high,
'His listless length at noontide would he stretch,
'And pore upon the brook that babbles by.

'Hard by yon wood, now
smiling, as in scorn,
'Mutt'ring his wayward fan-
cies, he would rove;
'Now drooping, woful wan,
like one forlorn,
'Or crazed with care, or
cross'd in hopeless love.



'One morn I miss'd him on the custom'd hill,
'Along the heath, and near his fav'rite tree:
'Another came; nor yet beside the rill,
'Nor up the lawn, nor at the wood was he.

'The next, with dirges due, in sad array,
'Slow through the churchway path we saw him borne.
'Approach and read (for thou canst read) the lay
'Graved on the stone beneath yon aged thorn.'

THE EPITAPH.

Here rests his head upon the lap of Earth
A youth to Fortune and to Fame unknown;
Fair Science frown'd not on his humble birth,
And Melancholy mark'd him for her own.

Large was his bounty, and his soul sincere,
Heav'n did a recompense as largely send;
He gave to Mis'ry all he had—a tear;
He gain'd from Heav'n ('twas all he wish'd)—a friend.

No farther seek his merits to disclose,
Or draw his frailties from their dread abode
(There they alike in trembling hope repose),
The bosom of his Father and his God.